



Senator Bob Oke

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Narrows Bridge Update

A REPORT TO THE 26TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

Dear Neighbor,

When I first came to the State Senate in 1991, the major district-specific issue for 26th District citizens who contacted me was the Narrows Bridge. It still is.

If you sit in the daily rush hour bridge traffic, or can't get to work or back home because the bridge is closed, you know the frustration. The bottom line is that there is significant gridlock and people have died on the only span across the Narrows that links us to Tacoma and the I-5 corridor. The loss of revenues from the state to subsidize ferry service will only compound the problem.

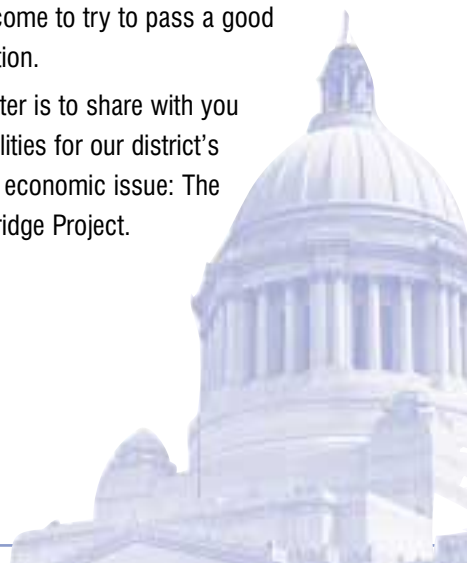
I want you to know that despite differences of opinions on how to get a new bridge, in Olympia and at home, my goal is to get a second span across the Narrows.

While I have worked hard for a specific solution to the Narrows Bridge issue in the past, I recognize and respect that with 146 other legislators to convince (most of whom represent constituents that never cross the bridge), the time has come to try to pass a good solution, not just a specific solution.

The purpose of this newsletter is to share with you some history, facts, and probabilities for our district's most pressing quality of life and economic issue: The Highway 16/Tacoma Narrows Bridge Project.

Sincerely,

Senator Bob Oke
26th Legislative District



Financing

Since 1994, the Highway 16/ Narrows Bridge Project has been slated to be financed through the Public-Private Initiatives in Transportation (PPI). Under this program, a private company arranges the financing and builds the bridge.

The other option for this project is public financing. Under this option, the state borrows the money in a series of bond sales to pay a private company to build the bridge.

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Both options rely on tolling to pay off the debt. The plain truth is that the Narrows Bridge is not on anyone’s radar screen for state funding — this was the case in 1991 and is still the case in 2002. Several colleagues have confirmed with me that tolling, as in the past, will be a way of the future for major bridge and new road projects in Washington State. I wish this wasn’t the reality of things, but it is. No tolls equals no bridge.

Also, the governor has even suggested the state take back the \$40 million that was secured for the work on both sides of the bridge. I will work hard to see that the money stays in the budget for those improvements.

I have worked on the Narrows Bridge project for approximately 10 years. In that time, it has been stalled and changed for many reasons. Securing enough votes in the Legislature to support the project has been difficult. The debate over whether to go with private financing or public financing continues. I have never been against public financing, I just knew the reality of getting it through the Legislature.

Public vs. Private Financing

There are pluses and many similarities to both financing options. Under a private financing plan, the debt issued for the Tacoma Narrows Bridge Project would not be an obligation of the State of Washington. Under federal law, a private company can set up a non-profit corporation to provide for tax-exempt financing. This tax-exempt financing provides for low interest rates, but will never be as low as the state interest rate, which is the lowest form of financing. With public financing the full, faith and credit of the State is behind the bonds and therefore the bonds carry a slightly lower interest rate. This lower rate can add up over the life of the debt and provide some savings to toll

payer’s in the future. The public financing option does consume a large portion of the remaining bonding capacity the legislature has authorized and therefore it is a challenge to convince legislators not affected by the bridge to support public financing. In either form of financing the debt will be repaid with tolls.

Design-Build construction for a fixed price is proposed for either type of financing, which gives greater security to toll payers that the project will not



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experience cost overruns. The private firm building the project commits to complete and open the bridge for a fixed price and a fixed schedule. Cost and schedule problems that are the private firm’s fault will not impact the toll payers as the private firm is responsible to pay damages for delay and absorb the cost.

I continue to seek the best solution. I will support whatever strategy seems destined for success.

Congestion & Safety

Over the past decade, many ideas have been looked at to help move cars and save lives on the bridge. From 1989 to 2000, there were 525 accidents on the bridge, 47 of these were opposite direction collisions, either head-on or sideswipe. In five of these opposite direction collisions, someone died, the two most recent a young mother and a young father.

To address the most dangerous of accidents, head-on, state traffic safety engineers looked at the possibility of a center barrier. The question was asked: Will a center barrier improve safety?



The answer has three components:

1. The minimum clearance of a lateral barrier for drivers is two feet, less than that and the barrier becomes part of the problem rather than the solution. This is especially true for vehicles bigger than a typical sedan and even more so for big trucks. With the current bridge having less than 10-foot-wide lanes (the current lane standard is 12 feet) and no shoulders for disabled vehicles or emergency stops and pullovers, the clearance would only be one foot, eight inches. With the way the wind blows on the bridge, that is not enough.
2. During off-peak hours, drivers can and do accidentally and momentarily stray into the center of the bridge and safely self-correct. With a barrier in place, such deviations would result in a collision with the barrier and an uncontrolled re-entry back onto the roadway for a possible second collision.

3. The larger and heavier jersey barriers, such as those used during construction on I-5, have been pushed by out-of-control vehicles into on-coming lanes. A small, lighter barrier that would have to be used on the bridge, even if bolted to the bridge surface, would not remain unmoved when struck by a large vehicle.

The conclusion reached by traffic safety engineers is: “Given the operating speeds, no shoulders, narrow lanes, distracting view, congestion and merging traffic at either end of the bridge, a center

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Another possible congestion/safety solution traffic safety engineers evaluated is reversible lanes. A comprehensive analysis was conducted during March 1997. The analysis looked at converting to three lanes east bound in the morning, and to three lanes west bound during the evening commute hours. The biggest problem with this concept is that it would narrow the already standard single lane even more. In addition, the barrier problem as described above would be present. Traffic data taken during May 1997 revealed that the actual congestion time would increase with a reversible lane on the Narrows Bridge because the single, narrow lane would be trying to carry 40 to 50 percent more traffic than capacity in the morning and 100 percent more than capacity in the evening.

As with the center barrier concept, traffic safety engineers concluded that reversible lanes would create more accidents than they would prevent.

The congestion across the Narrows will not get better on its own, and the bridge will not get safer on its own.

It should also be pointed out that with today’s technology, daily commuters will not have to stop at toll booths. Electronic transponders can be used by daily commuters and will automatically deduct the daily round-trip toll cost.

Narrows Bridge Update

The Past & Future

The current Tacoma Narrows Bridge was built with public financing and paid back by tolls. The bridge opened in 1950, and was paid off (tolls ended) in 1965. The current bridge has a capacity of 60,000 vehicles per day. However, today's traffic on the bridge is over 90,000 vehicles per day. By 2020, if another bridge is not built, it is predicted that 16 hours of congestion per day will be a reality. Also, I believe if we aren't successful in getting a bridge bill through this year, it won't happen in my lifetime.

The present design and plan for building a new parallel bridge allows for double-decking in the future for light rail and more cars. Not thinking about tomorrow, as was the case with the current bridge, is a mistake we cannot afford to make again. Also, the new bridge will include three 12-foot lanes going in one direction, two 10-foot shoulders, and a 10-foot bicycle/walking lane. This is 50 percent wider than the current bridge.

Once the new bridge opens, the



current bridge will be retrofitted and converted to three one-way lanes, including removing the center grate. This will allow for three 12-foot lanes and one 8-foot shoulder. In the future, both bridges may include an HOV lane connecting Highway 16 with I-5.

Time & Money

All of us know that when we put off making a major purchase — like buying a house — the price we could have paid for the same house at an earlier date is going to be higher today.

When the advisory ballot was submitted for a parallel bridge, the

construction cost was \$350-\$400 million. That was in 1997 dollars, and with inflation and the ever-increasing costs of this type of construction going up about \$2-3 million a month, the actual cost increased to where it reached \$540 million by the time the environment impact statement and engineering work was done and the contract negotiated and signed. We started with this figure at the beginning of the 2001 session — a year ago.

In addition, because no funds will be coming in to pay for the bridge until it is open, enough money will have to be borrowed to pay construction costs as the work is done (about four and one-half years). With interest, this will bring the total borrowed to about \$800 million in either public or private financing.

It is my prayer and hope that during this short 60-day session we will have a bill signed by the governor and construction started in the next six months. Time is money, and the longer this project is delayed, the more it will cost.

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WASHINGTON STATE SENATOR • 26th LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT

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